The Poor People

Lev Tolstoy

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(Based on a story by Victor Hugo)

In a fishing hut, Jeanna, wife of a fisherman, sits by the fire and repairs an old sail. Outside, the wind whistles and howls, and waves rumble are splash and break against the shore. The yard is dark and cold, the sea is storming, but it is warm and cozy in the fishing hut. Earthen floor is swept cleanly; the fire is still on in the stove; clean dishes glitter on the shelf. On the bed with lowered white canopy, five children sleep with the sounds of the howls of stormy sea. The husband, a fisher, since the morning went out on a boat trip in the sea and has not return yet. The woman hears the rumble and the roar of the waves. Jeanna is fearful.

Old wooden clock with a squeaky beat struck ten, eleven... Husband hasn't returned yet. Jeanna ponders. Her husband does not spare himself, goes to catch fish in the chill and in the storm. She, from morning till evening, is busy with her work. And so what? They barely feed themselves. And kids still have no shoes, and run around barefoot both is summer and in winter; and eat bread not even of wheat, but happy to have enough of rye. The only seasonings to their food they have is fish. "Well, thank God, children are healthy. There's nothing to complain, - thinks Jeanna and again listens to the storm. - Where is he now? Dear Lord, save him, save and have mercy!" - She says and crosses herself.

It's too early to sleep yet. Jeanna rises, puts a thick shawl on her head, lights up the lantern and goes outside to look, whether the sea became quieter, whether it dawns, and whether there's light at the lighthouse, and whether she can see her husband's boat. But you can't see anything in the sea. The wind is ripping off her shawl and with something detached knocks on the door of the neighbor's house, and Jeanna remembers that since evening she wanted to go visit her ill neighbor. "There is no one to look after her," - Jeanna thought and knocked at the door. Listened... Nobody answers.

"Bad is this widow's business," - thinks Jeanna, standing on the doorstep. –

“Although there are few children – only two, but still need to take care of everything alone. And then there's a disease! Ah, poor widow’s case. I’ll come in to see her.”

Jeanna knocked again and again. No one answered.

- Hey, neighbor! - Jeanna screamed. "I hope nothing bad has happened," - she thought and pushed the door.

In the house it was damp and cold. Jeanna raised her lantern to examine where the sick was. And the first thing her eyes caught was the bed standing directly opposite the door, and on the bed was her neighbor, lying on her back so quiet and motionless as only the dead lie. Jeanna brought the lantern even closer. Yes, it’s her. The head is pivoted backward; on a cold, bluish face was the calmness of death. Pale dead hand, as if stretched for something, fell and hanged down. And immediately, not far from the dead mother, two small children, curly and plump-cheeked, covered with an old dress, slept, cowered and huddled together with their blond heads. Apparently, mother, before dying, still managed to wrap their legs with an old shawl and covered them with her dress. They breathed evenly and quietly, slept sweetly and soundly.

Jeanna takes the cradle with children and, having wrapped them with a scarf, carries them home. Her heart beats strongly; she doesn't know how or why she did it, but she knows that couldn't not to do what she did.

At home, she puts sleepy children to bed with her own kids and hurriedly lowers the canopy. She is pale and excited. It’s like her conscience torments her. "What will he say? – She speaks to itself, - “It's no joke, five of their own children - he had enough of troubles to take care of them. Is is him?.. No, not yet! And why did she only take them! He’ll kill me! And rightly so, I deserve that. Here he is! No!.. Well, thank God!"

The door squeaked, as if someone has entered. Jeanna gasped and rose from her chair.

"No. Again there’s no one! My Lord, and why did I do it? How am I going to

look him in his eyes now?.. And Jeanna ponders and for long time sits silently by the bedside.

The rain stopped; it dawned, but the wind still buzzes and the sea roars as before.

Suddenly the door swung open, a whiff of fresh sea air entered the room, and tall swarthy fisherman, dragging behind him a wet broken fishing net, enters the room with the words:

- Here I am, Jeanna!

- Oh, it's you! - Says Jeanna and stops, not daring to raise her eyes.

- Oh, what a night! Nightmare!

- Yes, yes, the weather was terrible! Well, how’s fishing?

- Rubbish, totally rubbish! Caught nothing. Only ripped the net. Bad, bad!.. Yes, I'll tell you, what the weather it was! I can’t remember a night like this. Forget fishing! Thank God, I got home alive… Well, and what did you do here without me?

Fisherman dragged the net into the room and sat down by the stove.

- Me? - Jeanna said, turning white. – What about me... I was sewing... The wind was blowing so that it made me scared. Was afraid for you.

- Yes, yes, - muttered the husband, - the weather was pretty darn bad! But what can you do!

They both went silent.

- You know, - said Jeanna, - our neighbor Simona has died.

- Really?

- And I do not know when; probably, even yesterday. Yes, it was a difficult

death for her - her heart ached for the children! After all, she had two little children... One of them is not talking yet, and another one is just starting to crawl.

Jeanna stopped. Fisherman frowned; his face became serious and worried.

- What a story! - He said, scratching his head. - Well, but what can you do! We have to take them, because when they'll wake up, how would they feel near the deceased? That's OK, we'll manage somehow! Go then, hurry!

But Jeanna did not move from their seat.

- What's up with you? Don't you want to? What is wrong with you, Jeanna?

- Here they are, - said Jeanna and opened the canopy.